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Editorial

TRULY CHILLING

Rep. Barton's harassment of scientists, disdain for fellow lawmakers a disservice

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The heart of science isn't quiet. Challenges to data, methodology and interpretation churn throughout the scientific process. Harassment of scientists, however, deserves no role in scientific inquiry. U.S. Rep. Joe Barton, (R-TX), ignores this principle in his shameful hectoring of well-known climatologists.

Late last month, Barton requested mounds of documents from three scientists known for studying global warming. As chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Barton demanded detailed documentation of almost every aspect of hundreds of studies the scientists had penned.

He made a similar request to the head of the National Science Foundation, writing, "The term 'records' is to be construed in the broadest sense ... whether printed or recorded electronically or magnetically or stored in any type of data bank, including, but not limited to ... summaries of personal conversations or interviews ... diaries ... checks and canceled checks ... bank statements."

Barton gave the scientists 18 days to comply with the request, which he has the power to convert into a subpoena.

One recipient was University of Virginia researcher Michael E. Mann, whose studies suggest the Earth's climate has grown warmer in large part due to humans' use of fossil fuels. Mann co-authored a 2001 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Since then, numerous climate studies have supported Mann's original findings.

Partly because of its influence, Mann's early work still draws critiques from global-warming skeptics. Barton cited these critiques in his letter to Mann, adding "this dispute surrounding your studies bears directly on important questions about the federally funded work upon which climate studies rely."

The extraordinary scope of Barton's investigation has rightly appalled many scientists and lawmakers. The European Geosciences Union called the requests "burdensome and inappropriate." The director of the National Academy of Sciences vainly offered to appoint an independent panel to review the consensus on global warming claims.

A mark of the inappropriate nature of Barton's actions, a fellow Republican rebuked him in a public letter. U.S. Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., chairman of the House Science

Committee, warned Barton that his investigation was outside his committee's jurisdiction and showed "an insensitivity toward the workings of science [that] may reflect your Committee's inexperience in the areas you are investigating."

Calling Barton's precedent "truly chilling," Boehlert added, "My primary concern about your investigation is that its purpose seems to be to intimidate scientists rather than to learn from them."

Barton has responded to his critics with a bizarre tone unsuited to the subject's gravity. "We regret that our little request for data has given them a chill," his committee spokesman recently said.

Barton is right that global warming is a pressing and controversial issue — and tracking the use of federal funding is a worthwhile endeavor. In his indiscriminate mining for documents, however, Barton ignores the first steps of fact-finding: hearings, discussions with the scientists and reading the peer-reviewed and published papers in the field.

Given his indebtedness to the oil and power industries — from 1989-2004 he received more money from these industries than any other House member — Barton seems to be acting on motives other than a thirst for truth. This is a disservice to the nation. Harassing scientists is the wrong way to find answers to environmental questions that affect us all.